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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 001531

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SUBJECT: FORMER PREMIER SU TSENG-CHANG ON DOMESTIC POLITICS
AND DPP LEADERSHIP

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a meeting with the Director on October 24, former Premier Su Tseng-chang expressed disappointment that the DPP has not been able to take advantage of what he regarded as the dismal performance of President Ma Ying-jeou and the KMT administration. While Ma's approval rating in polls has fallen to the mid-20s, support for the DPP also remains mired in the low 20s. In Su's view, the problem has been the DPP's inability to take clear and speedy action in determining the party's future course and dealing with the controversial former President Chen Shui-bian. While crediting Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen with doing her best, Su suggested she lacked political experience and grassroots understanding of the DPP. Su also complained that the indecisiveness of party headquarters in selecting candidates could cost the DPP in the December 2009 local elections. End Summary.

Demonstrations Must be Peaceful

¶2. (C) The Director and former Premier Su Tseng-chang discussed DPP politics and related issues in a meeting at Su's office on October 24. Su told the Director that supporters from the two counties where he had served as magistrate (Pingtung and Taipei) were very enthusiastic about participating in the protest demonstration the opposition party would be holding in Taipei City on October 25. While DPP supporters would have to express their anger against President Ma Ying-jeou (KMT) and their unease over the KMT's dealings with the PRC in the October 25 demonstration, the avoidance of violence was especially important. Su expressed concern the KMT might try to "trap" the opposition into a violent situation, which, he asserted, the KMT had done in the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident.

¶3. (C) When he was DPP chairman in 2005, Su recalled, he had taken effective measures to ensure that a very large demonstration against the PRC's Anti-Secession Law was peaceful. Su said he was concerned current Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen lacked experience and therefore might not take the necessary steps, including a crisis response mechanism, to ensure that the October 25 demonstration would be peaceful. (Note: The October 25 demonstration turned out to be peaceful, without major incident.)

14. (C) Since coming into office five months ago, President Ma Ying-jeou's rating in public opinion polls has plummeted dramatically, Su noted. Su attributed Ma's low standing in the polls to popular dissatisfaction both with his statements on Taiwan's status and also with the way he has dealt with problems. Economic issues are another factor in Ma's polling problems, Su added. Over the past 10-20 years, Su observed, the KMT was able to protect Ma and play up his image, which made Ma the most widely accepted political figure in Taiwan. Now that he is president, however, Ma is facing widespread criticism, and dissatisfaction far exceeds satisfaction with his performance.

15. (C) According to Su, another reason for public dissatisfaction with President Ma (and Premier Liu) is their perceived arrogance. During the previous administration, the DPP government supported the improvement of cross-Straits economic relations, but the obstacles to progress came from the PRC side. The KMT, however, accused the DPP of mismanagement and of pursuing a closed economic policy during the election campaign. After coming to power, the KMT's cross-Straits economic policies, such as increasing PRC tourists, have not proven effective. Furthermore, Ma has been too weak toward China.

DPP Has Its Own Problems

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16. (C) Unfortunately for the DPP, Su continued, the party has been unable to take advantage of the opportunity presented by Ma's difficulties. This is reflected in polling, which shows that public support for the DPP has not increased. After former President Chen admitted in mid-August that his family had sent funds overseas, support for the DPP declined to just 17 percent. Following the August 30 protest demonstration against the KMT government, support for the party rose to 23 percent but it has now fallen again to 20-21 percent.

Chen Shui-bian

17. (C) In Su's opinion, the DPP's low standing is because the party has not given the public a clear definition of what it stands for, and it has not dealt resolutely with the Chen Shui-bian situation. Given Chen Shui-bian's legal problems, it is quite understandable the former president would seek support by traveling to local areas and speaking out, claiming that he was a victim of political persecution. Chen Shui-bian is simply fighting to protect himself. However, the question facing the DPP is how to deal with the Chen situation. The DPP had several opportunities when it should have dealt quickly and clearly with Chen, but it did not do so. The problem was a lack of "guts" and "decisiveness," Su suggested.

18. (C) Continuing, Su observed that the KMT has been playing up the investigations of Chen and his family for corruption, leaking sensitive details about ongoing confidential investigations by the prosecutors. KMT politicians like Legislator Chiu Yi have been revealing case developments on a daily basis. At the same time, the aggressive KMT campaign against Chen has increased sympathy and support for the former president in the DPP base. While these supporters are opposed to corruption, they believe the KMT government's legal proceedings against Chen are unfair.

19. (C) Su acknowledged that DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen has worked very hard and wants to do a good job. However, Tsai does not fully understand the DPP, having no previous party experience. In addition, she is hemmed in by the party's

factions, which have their own agendas. If the DPP wants to become the ruling again, it will have to shift to a more centrist position to attract a majority of the voters. In 2000, Su recalled, the DPP won the presidency by adopting a middle-of-the-road platform. However, after the 2004 election, President Chen shifted the party toward an extreme Deep Green position in reaction to the KMT protests against him over corruption issues.

Concern about Prospects for 2009 Local Elections

¶10. (C) Su said he was very concerned about DPP prospects in the December 2009 local elections. Su complained that party headquarters, which now has the power to select candidates, has waffled rather than acting decisively. Although selecting one candidate rather than another is bound to create some hard feelings, delaying the nomination process will increase rather than reduce problems. If the DPP does poorly in the 2009 local elections, Ma will misinterpret the results and believe he is acting correctly.

¶11. (C) DPP Chairperson Tsai needs to be firmer, Su suggested. Observing that Tsai has "many opinions," Su said his only option was to patiently offer his advice. In polling on Taiwan's ten top political figures, Su noted that Tsai Ing-wen came out first with about 50 percent, while he, with 46 percent approval, was in fourth place behind Tsai, Legislative Yuan Speaker Wang Jin-pyng, and KMT Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung.

Comment

¶12. (C) Without directly criticizing Tsai Ing-wen, Su seemed to suggest that he could do a significantly better job in

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running the DPP. Su clearly would like to see the DPP make a stronger recovery in preparation for future elections beginning in late 2009. We suspect he would like to take on Ma in 2012, but believes the party needs to be in a better position if he is to have a chance. Tsai of course is a potential rival for the 2012 DPP nomination but only if she can prove herself in the local elections next year. Hence, Su's ambiguous assessment of Tsai's performance thus far attempts to juggle his own competing priorities.

SYOUNG